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MOTORING THROUGH  
NORTHERN ITALY

NAPOLEON'S FIRST CAMPAIGN





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NAPOLEON'S FIRST  
CAMPAIGN

BY  
CHARLES PORTER KIMBALL

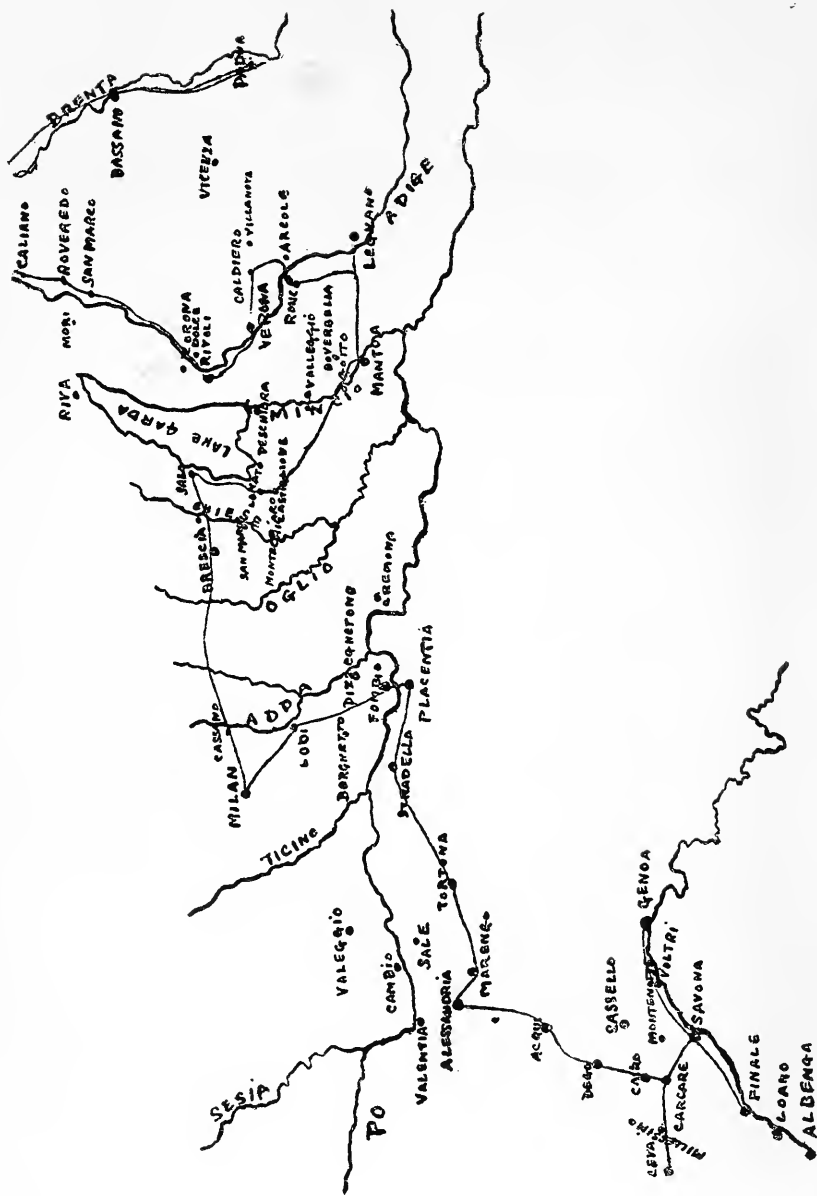


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# MOTORING THROUGH NORTHERN ITALY



IT was with the intention of visiting the battlefields of Napoleon Bonaparte's first campaign that we decided to take a motor trip through northern Italy. There it was that the great Corsican laid the foundation of his glory. It was through Italy that he subjugated France. So, early one bright July morning in 1910, with a typically hot Italian sun and the concierge of the Eden Palace Hotel, the only ones up early enough to see us off, we left Genoa in an Itala machine, with Alessandria our destination for the first day's run. For some distance the road follows the Mediterranean, turning innumerable sharp angles, thereby endangering many a collision with peasants in market wagons—on whom the chauffeur vented his anger in true Italian style. Not only were we obliged to stop in order that we might argue the better as to which had the right of way, but at most railroad crossings the gates would be lowered a good ten minutes before the train so much as put in an appearance, and only by the inducement of a few coppers would the woman with the red flag consent to let us pass. We turned inland at Savona, ascending the slopes of the Apennines, and stopped at the crossroads of Carcare. This is the fork which Napoleon had seized after the battle of Montenotte, as it was of great strategic value



Castle of Cosseria

—the road to the left leading to Turin and that to the right to Milan. We left the main road in order to get some pictures of the castle of Cosseria, after which we went on to Millesimo. After returning to Carcare we soon reached Cairo where we had an uneatable lunch at a queer old tavern. In some miraculous way the daughter of the house managed to relieve the pockets of my duster of all that they contained while we, blissfully ignorant of the fact,

were in the meantime paying for the meal, the greater part of which we fed to the dog. In three hours more we were in our little hotel at Alessandria where we had planned to spend the night—never supposing that the distance was so short.

When Napoleon Bonaparte, appointed Commander-in-Chief of the Army of Italy in March, 1796, arrived in Nice, he found the army in a pitiable state. It had been utterly neglected during the winter by the Directory—it had very little money, its generals were demoralized, there was corruption connected with the administration, and the soldiers were half starved and half clothed. It appeared anything but a bright prospect to Napoleon. At first the older generals looked askance at the young Corsican and grumbled at being superseded by a young man of twenty-six who had little experience in war. But Bonaparte soon showed his character, by his punishment of the government officials who were robbing the army, his personal zeal, and the pains he exerted to have his men well fed and clothed. He issued a very stirring proclamation, foretelling his victories and the triumphant march through Italy, thereby raising the spirits of the army. To better illustrate his strategy, it might be advisable to describe the position of the opposing armies. The divisions of Serurier and Augereau, about 15,000 strong, were spread out along the upper Tanaro valley down to the sea, from which point to beyond Savona were 17,000 men under Massena and La Harpe. The troops of the Allies were poorly distributed, as they were stretched out for more than sixty miles and inter-communication between the various parts was almost impossible owing to the mountain ranges separating them. Colli, commanding the Piedmontese, stood along the roads from Coni to Millesimo, with about 25,000 men; and the Austrians, 35,000 strong under Beaulieu, a

veteran of the Seven Years' War, lay spread out from the Bochetta Pass, north of Genoa, to Dego. Napoleon saw the false position in which the enemy had placed itself, with its strength at both ends of a long line, and a weak center. To weaken their center still further, he bluffed Beaulieu into supposing that Genoa was the point of the French attack. Napoleon had previously warned that city that on account of their violation of neutrality he was going to punish them and this news was immediately transmitted to Beaulieu who had orders from Vienna to protect Genoa at any cost. Curiously enough nine years later the Republic of Genoa voluntarily gave up its independence and contented itself with becoming the principal town in the 27th military division of the Empire. Consequently, Cervoni's march on Voltri alarmed Beaulieu who reinforced Sebottendorf and ordered the latter to arrest the French advance. Another Austrian force of 10,000 troops under Argenteau was ordered to debouch from Sassello to Savona. Beaulieu supposed that between these two columns the advance guard of the French would be cut off and destroyed. The Austrian general could not have played better into Napoleon's hands. On April 10th, while Cervoni held Sebottendorf's superior numbers in check, Bonaparte quickly brought up Augereau, Massena and La Harpe to attack Argenteau's column which had been arrested by Rampon, with 1,200 men, in the redoubt at Montenotte. The Austrians were not prepared for an attack in such force and had to beat a disastrous retreat to Dego with a loss of 2,500 men. On this day Napoleon wrote to Massena: "Everything assures us that the work of to-day and that of to-morrow will tell in history." Some years later when the Emperor of Austria asked Napoleon whence he dated his nobility, he replied calmly: "Sire, from the day of the battle of Montenotte." Beaulieu, who accompanied Sebottendorf's



column, learning of the combat at Montenotte, saw the uselessness of a further advance towards Savona and ordered his troops to reach Dego by such mountain roads as were available. Napoleon now turned his attention to Colli and sent 10,000 men against him via Millesimo and ordered Serurier to advance down to Tanaro. On the 13th Augereau struck a force under Provera, in the castle of Cosseria.



Adda—Lodi

From want of water and ammunition, the Sardinian general was obliged to surrender next day with 1,500 men. On the 14th Napoleon turned his attention to the Austrians again and attacked Dego, which fell by evening. It was here that Bonaparte for the first time noticed Lannes in action, as he led a brisk bayonet charge which drove the Austrians out of the town. In these three or four days, Napoleon had worked so rapidly and successfully that he had pierced the center of the Allies, causing them a loss of about 9,000

troops, and set Beaulieu to collecting his scattered soldiers for the bare protection of Lombardy. The Austrians were now fully cut off from Colli, and Napoleon determined to crush the latter before Beaulieu could gather enough men to come to his assistance. On the 28th a truce was signed between France and Piedmont at Cherasco, whereby Napoleon got possession of the three fortresses of Coni, Alessandria and Tortona. As Bonaparte said in his proclamation of April 26th, the French army had won six victories, taken twenty-one flags, fifty-five guns and fifteen thousand prisoners and killed or wounded more than ten thousand men in a fortnight. He ended with the fulfilled prediction, "And if, victors of Toulon, you foretold the immortal campaign of 1796, your present victories foretell a yet finer one."

Our second day's run was from Alessandria to Milan, by way of Placentia. We left early in the morning, and after paying the large sum of one franc for our garage bill, struck the broad highway which leads to Tortona. A few miles out of Alessandria we came upon the famous battlefield of Marengo, where four years later Napoleon won a memorable victory over the Austrians which brought peace to the Continent for several years. From Tortona we followed the same road over which the special column under Gen. Dallemagne made its famous march to Placentia. Here we stopped for lunch. After partaking of a meal, consisting principally of soup and fruit, as the rest of the menu was too strongly Italian for us, we again set out, and within an hour or so reached Lodi. We crossed the long bridge and thought of the courage it must have required to rush over in the face of cannon. We were so glad at about four o'clock to perceive in the distance the familiar spires and lace-work of the Milan Cathedral looming up ahead of us, as we wanted to see as much of that famous city as we could before darkness set in.

To return to the Austrians, Beaulieu had decided that it would be impossible to remain on the right bank of the Po and had consequently crossed the Valentia on May 1st. He took up his position at Valeggio, and along the north bank of the Po as far as the Ticino. Napoleon, in his negotiations with the Piedmontese, stipulated that he was to have permission to cross the Po near Valentia,



Bridge over Adda at Lodi

without having the slightest intention of so doing, however. Beaulieu did not suspect the bluff and prepared to meet their supposed crossing. Bonaparte saw that by holding the Austrians opposite Valencia, he might cross the Po further down with little resistance and thereby turn their position. Consequently, on May 6th a special corps, under Gen. Dallemagne, started its march for Placentia, while Serurier at Valencia and Massena at Salò, kept the Austrians from suspecting this turning manoeuvre. On the

7th the head of Dallemagne's column reached Placentia, after marching from Tortona, 45 miles, in thirty-six hours. The lack of a pontoon bridge prevented Napoleon from dealing the Austrians a fatal blow, for the crossing, by means of boats, was necessarily slow. By the 8th Liptay, with 5,000 men, had come up and struck the French column at Fombio where, during the night, La Harpe was killed by the fire of some of his own men. Liptay was forced back on Pizzighetone with considerable loss, and Beaulieu, by this time realizing the full meaning of the French crossing at Placentia and the danger of his being cut in two, gave immediate orders for a complete withdrawal behind the Adda and concentration at Cremona. He left Sebottendorf with 12,000 troops at Lodi to act as rear guard. During the 8th and 9th Massena's and Augereau's divisions crossed at Placentia and pushed forward to Borghetto where, at 3 A. M. on the tenth, Napoleon joined the former's division. On Dallemagne's reporting that Lodi was held in force, orders were at once issued for the various divisions to march thither. Before noon the French van reached Lodi, which was soon taken by Dallemagne's grenadiers. The Austrians, in their retreat, were followed so closely by the French troops that they could not destroy the bridge, and Napoleon, seeing this, ordered batteries to open fire on those across the river and give time for Augereau's and Massena's troops, 12,000 in all, to come up. At 7 P. M. the grenadiers, formed in a deep column, dashed upon the long bridge shouting "Vive La Republic." They were brought to a standstill by the enemy's fire and only rallied by the exertions of their chiefs—Dallemagne, Massena, Berthier, Lannes and Napoleon—who, without a moment's hesitation led them forward again. The first Austrian line and all the guns were captured and soon Sebottendorf, seeing the impossibility of keeping his men in

good order, retreated toward Cremona. Some military critics have blamed Napoleon for his attack on the bridge at Lodi, claiming that it would have been wiser and safer to have turned the Austrian position by crossing further up the river just as Beaumont's cavalry division actually did. The fact of the matter is that Napoleon wished to give an example of his courage and Lodi was the first chance he had of doing this, for, though it was not a great strategic feat, it was extremely bold. Others claim that after he had accomplished his purpose, he should have followed Sebottendorf's division more closely than he did and Beaulieu himself admitted that Napoleon could have gained the city of Mantua, as it was totally unprepared for a siege. The French troops, however, had had no rest for nearly a month and Napoleon realized that Beaulieu had the start and it would be extremely hard to catch him before he reached Mantua. Furthermore he thought it better to establish French rule over what had already been gained rather than advance prematurely. The battle of Lodi and the capture of Pizzighetone, two days later, gave the French the whole course of the Adda and opened the gates of Milan to Napoleon.

On our third day's tour we set out bright and early, bound for Mantua. We had lunch at Brescia and had the pleasure of being served by a waiter who spoke fairly good English. It seemed so strange that a man who had been energetic enough to go all the way to London in order to speak her language should bury himself in such a small town, especially one unfrequented by tourists. The scenery that afternoon was the most beautiful so far, as the greater part of the road ran along the Lake of Garda. Our first view of the lake was from the heights above Salo—a never-to-be-forgotten sight—with the color of the water the most intense dark blue, within which the sky was reflected and as a back-

ground the high dark mountains making a perfect frame for this marvelous painting of Nature. We left the lake at Desenzano and passed through Lonato and Castiglione. Crossing the Mincio at Goito we followed the road along the left bank and shortly reached the broad expanse of water that surrounds Mantua. The city itself, on account of the narrow streets and enclosing walls, was extremely hot and stifling. The only hotel that the place can boast of was charming—the restaurant being out of doors in a courtyard. Mantua having a large garrison, we saw more soldiers there than in any other city where we had stopped.

The defeat at Lodi determined Beaulieu to seek safety behind the Mincio, towards which river the French advanced from the Adda the last week in May. Again the Austrian commander was duped as to the real point of crossing, and on the 30th, Kilmaine, with the van, forced a passage at Valleggio, the other divisions following. The Austrians were so demoralized that they retired behind the Adige and assembled at Dolce. Napoleon had to take Mantua before advancing any further, and it was that siege and the various attempts to relieve it that occupied the attention of both leaders. Bonaparte established his headquarters at Roverbella, whence he could watch the siege of Mantua, and take care of any Austrian advance down the Adige valley. Of the 42,000 French troops, Massena's corps was stationed about Verona, those of Serurier and Augereau were besieging Mantua, and Dalmagne's grenadiers, with the division of Vaubois from the Army of the Alps, were at Roverbella. During June and July Napoleon wrote repeatedly for reinforcements, as reports had come in that Beaulieu's successor, Wurmser, with 25,000 veterans from the Rhine, was ordered to relieve Mantua. The siege of that city had been carried on actively in spite of the fact that French were far from being well equipped for it,

having only 140 heavy guns against 316. Two attempts were made in July to take the place by assault, but they failed, and a siege bombardment was resorted to. Towards the end of July Wurmser began his advance for the relief of Mantua. Dividing his army into two columns, he sent Quosdonavich, with 18,000 troops around Lake Garda, and with the main body of about 30,000 troops, prepared descend the Adige from



Bridge leading to Mantua

Trent. The Austrian commander thought the French would be forced to fall back immediately to the right bank of the Po, and consequently ordered Quosdonavich, after taking Brescia, to seize Placentia and cut off Napoleon's retreat. Had he been dealing with any other general than Bonaparte no doubt he would have reasoned correctly, for the French were in a ticklish position. The enemy by the 29th had broken through the French lines at Rivoli, Salo and Brescia. Although Napoleon feared he would have to give up the line

of the Mincio, he was determined not to retreat without a struggle. After fully collecting himself, he saw the mistake Wurmser had made in separating his superior army into so many columns that if attacked separately, would prove too weak for the combined French army. Montenotte had taught the Austrians nothing, for they still clung to the idea of an advance in many columns. Napoleon decided to fall on the division of Quosdonavich and ordered Sauret to retake Salo and Massena to give up Verona and take post at Lonato. As every man was needed to meet the Austrian advance, the siege of Mantua was raised, and Serurier and Augereau given orders to assemble at Valeggio, whence they were hurried to Montechiaro. The French were now entirely massed on the west side of the Mincio prepared to bring superior numbers against the column of Quosdonavich. Wurmser, in the meantime, reaching Valleggio July 31st, determined to cross the Mincio and fall on the rear of the French, and had he done so promptly, might have seriously inconvenienced Napoleon's plans, but fortunately for the latter, he visited Mantua first, leaving Bayalich at Peschiera and Liptay at Goito. The former, crossing the Mincio, marched on Lonato, from whence Massena was obliged to retire to Porte San Marco. Liptay, crossing at Goito and pushing on to Montechiaro, was met by Augereau's troops returning from that place and driven back beyond Castiglione. On the 4th of August Wurmser detached two columns on useless errands, whereas Napoleon used every available man for the coming battle. "When you want to deliver battle, assemble all your forces; neglect none of them; a battalion sometimes decides a day," was one of the foremost rules of Napoleon's strategy. When the battle began Wurmser made the mistake of stretching out his right towards Lonato, hoping to effect a union with Quosdonavich, whose retreat around Lake Garda he did not



know of. Massena held the Austrian right, while Serurier and Kilmaine pressed in the enemy's left, and at the critical moment, Augereau assaulted their center, which had been weakened too much by Wurmser's effort to stretch out his right too far and to reinforce his left against the cavalry attacks of Kilmaine. Wurmser saw his mistake too late and realized that he must retreat at once to save his army, and this



Adige Valley

he did, though with considerable loss. On the 6th Massena advanced against Peschiera and Augereau against Valeggio. But there was little fighting as Wurmser retired to Trent. The French troops took the same position they had occupied in July and the siege of Mantua — which Wurmser had reinforced by seven battalions — was resumed.

To return to our trip, it was well that we left Mantua early in the morning, as we were obliged to leave the main road in order to go to Arcola, and this took us longer than

we had anticipated. It was well worth our trouble, however, as we found there an interesting old monument commemorating Napoleon's famous victory. Passing through Caldiero, we reached Verona about noon. From there up the Adige valley there was quite a noticeable difference in the air as well as the scenery. Our approaching the Alps was, of course, what caused these changes, for Trent, where we intended to stop for the night, is right in the midst of the Tyrolean mountains. The most difficult part of the whole trip was, perhaps, our wishing to see the battlefield of Rivoli. We were obliged, after leaving the main highway and going to a certain point of the river, to drive the car on to a ferry just large enough to hold it, and then by means of a pulley and the assistance of the current, we crossed slowly to the other bank. Our path was now a narrow winding one, and as there were sentries all along, and we were obliged to pass through the gates of the fort, we naturally were unable to take away with us anything more than a mental picture. We reached Trent late in the afternoon and found an excellent hotel. It is quite modern and the meals most enjoyable, especially when eaten out on the huge veranda with the keen air as an appetizer. Although we were obliged to go indoors at dinner on account of the rain, we had little idea of the consequences a storm in the mountains meant, but we soon learned by experience.

Towards the end of August Wurmser again made plans for the relief of Mantua, which required a division of forces. Davidovich, with 20,000 troops, was ordered to guard the approach to Trent, as well as the upper Adige valley, while Wurmser, with 25,000 men, descended the Brenta valley to Bassano. The fact that he supposed the French would be forced to fall back behind the Mincio, showed how little the Austrian commander had learned from his previous campaign. On September 1st Napoleon ordered Massena and Augereau to

advance up the Adige, and Vaubois up the Chiese around the Lake of Garda to Mori, where all three divisions were to unite. Several fierce battles were fought at Roveredo and Caliano, for, although the French had a superiority of numbers, the Austrians had the advantage of good defensive positions. The French fought brilliantly and after capturing some three thousand prisoners at Caliano drove Davidovich



Monument at Arcola

in disorder back to Trent. Wurmser should have recalled those troops which were along the Brenta, to reinforce Davidovich, but instead, he hastened to Bassano, with the object of seizing the lower Adige and falling on the rear of the French. On the morning of the 5th Massena entered Trent. Davidovich should have retired through the Brenta valley and rejoined his chief, but his orders from Vienna held him in the Tyrol, to prevent Napoleon from advancing and joining Moreau near Innsbruck. On the 8th Napoleon overtook

Wurmser at Bassano, where a battle was fought which resulted in the utter rout of the Austrians. They lost nearly 5,000 prisoners, 35 guns, 200 ammunition wagons and five flags of which two were taken by Lannes himself. Wurmser and the treasury came within a minute or two of being captured. Napoleón followed up this victory with his usual promptitude, hoping to catch and cut off Wurmser before he reached Mantua. One accident after another prevented him, however, and on the 12th Wurmser, at the head of only 12,000 troops, entered Mantua, to become one of the besieged instead of a liberator. In less than two weeks the third Austrian army had been defeated with a loss of more than 15,000 in killed, wounded or prisoners. But Napoleon's position, in spite of his many victories, was serious, and he wrote the Directory that unless they wished to lose what had already been gained, they must send him more troops, as he now had less than 30,000. The French reverses on the Rhine had cut off hopes of reinforcements from that direction. Austria would not listen to peace negotiations until she had recovered Lombardy, and she intended to try again to raise the siege of Mantua. Venice might declare war on France, and she could put 20,000 troops into the field. The Pope had broken the terms of his armistice, and by the death of the king of Sardinia, the attitude of Piedmont again became questionable. Meanwhile, by the end of October, Austria once more prepared to relieve Mantua. Davidovich, with 20,000 troops, had orders to take Trent, while another army of 30,000 under Alvinzi, was to recapture Bassano. These two columns were to unite at Verona and Wurmser was notified to get ready to make a sortie at the proper time. The one thing in Napoleon's favor was that the Austrians were again operating against him on divergent lines and he hoped to be able to repeat his former movements against

Wurmser — this time, however, to beat Alvinzi and hurry up the Brenta valley and attack Davidovich in his rear. But this was not to be, for not only did the latter push Vaubois before him, but Napoleon failed to inflict a decisive blow on Alvinzi. On November 8th the latter had got as far as Vicenza, with 27,000 troops, and Davidovich with 16,000 as far as Roverdero. Napoleon at this time was at Verona with



Brenta Valley

21,000 and Vaubois at La Corona with 8,000. By the 11th, Alvinzi had moved to Villanova. Napoleon sent Massena up the Adige valley to gauge the situation, for if Davidovich advanced he determined to fall on him first and crush him, so as to keep his line of communications through Peschiera. Massena, however, reported that Davidovich was inactive, as the latter had heard that Vaubois had received reinforcements. Had Alvinzi pushed rapidly on to Verona, Davidovich forced Vaubois back, and Wurmser made a sortie, it would have

seemed as if the total Austrian force of 65,000 would have been able to overwhelm the French army of 45,000. But time and speed did not enter into the calculations of the Austrian commanders. On the afternoon of the 11th, Napoleon took the offensive and drove the advance Austrian van back on Caldiero, where during the night they entrenched themselves. On the 12th Napoleon attacked, but a driving rainstorm blew in the faces of the French troops, and by the time Massena came up, Alvinzi's main body arrived and Bonaparte was forced to retreat to Verona. The worst part of this defeat was that all the best generals were wounded — Joubert, Lannes, Victor, Murat and Rampon. Napoleon's situation was most perilous and any other general would immediately have ordered a retreat behind the Mincio. There was one chance left and Napoleon determined to try that rather than retreat. A force of three thousand men was left in Verona with orders to hold it at any cost, and on the evening of the 14th Napoleon marched his men out of the Milan gate and headed towards the west. No doubt the soldiers expected it was a retreat behind the Mincio. But soon the army turned south and headed rapidly down the Adige towards Ronco, where Napoleon had ordered a bridge to be built, and on the morning of the 15th the French army crossed. Had it not been for a few Hungarian regiments in Arcola, the surprise would have been complete and Alvinzi taken in flank and rear, but the marshes between Ronco and Arcola, having only one causeway, rendered a quick advance impossible. For three days the battle raged and not until the 18th did Alvinzi, reduced to 15,000 troops, retire to the Brenta. The French had been lucky in the fact that Davidovich had not moved until the 17th, on which day he pushed Vaubois back to Paschiera. Napoleon now turned his

attention to Davidovich who, hearing of Alvinzi's retreat, retired up the Adige valley. During this short campaign the Austrians had lost over 20,000 troops, but by January, 1797, Alvinzi, with 45,000 soldiers, was preparing the fourth attempt to relieve Mantua. Again the Austrian plan was faulty, as it provided for an advance in three columns. On the 7th of January, Provera with 9,000 troops, left



Road through the valley—Brenta

Padua, and Bayalich, with 6,000, left Bassano. Napoleon did not know for some time from which quarter the main Austrian body would advance, and until he was certain, he made no move. Joubert's report of the Austrian advance on La Corona cleared up the situation and Napoleon judged, rightly, that the chief column was that advancing down the Adige. Joubert with his small division had abandoned La Corona on the 12th and retired to Rivoli, where, on the 13th, he was attacked by the Austrian van. His dispatches





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